



# AFRICA SECURITY BRIEF

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## Urban Fragility and Security in Africa

BY STEPHEN COMMINS

- ◆ Unprecedented rates of urban migration over the past decade have contributed to a dramatic expansion in the size of urban slums and higher levels of poverty, violence, and instability in Africa's cities.
- ◆ The drivers of violence associated with urban fragility are primarily related to weak and illegitimate governance, inequitable development, limited livelihood opportunities, and legal structures that inhibit land tenure and new business start-up.
- ◆ Solutions to Africa's urban fragility cannot be addressed solely through security structures but must be part of a broader development strategy.

### HIGHLIGHTS

Africa's rapid urbanization is a new and underappreciated driver of state fragility. Fostered by prospects of economic opportunity, conflict-related displacement, and environmental pressures in rural areas, Africa's cities are growing by an estimated 15 to 18 million people each year.<sup>1</sup> With more than 40 percent of Africans below the age of 15, many of them destitute, Africa's cities have become densely concentrated centers of unemployed young men. This is a combustible mix that can intensify violent crime, gang activity, illicit trafficking, links to transnational organized criminal syndicates, and political instability. The repercussions affect virtually every country on the continent. The slums of Kibera (Nairobi), Karu (Abuja), Soweto (Johannesburg), Camp Luka (Kinshasa), Bonaberi (Douala), and elsewhere are already largely no-go

zones for state security forces. And as urbanization accelerates, the security problems are likely to grow worse.

Urban fragility is a form of state fragility—a context of deteriorating governance and prolonged political crisis or conflict—with a locus in urban areas. Fragile governments lack either the will or capacity to deliver basic services to and provide security for their citizens. Grievances around this lack of essential services, coupled with increased insecurity, crime, and lawlessness, contribute to greater levels of urban violence.

Urban centers, especially capitals and regional cities, are also typically seats of government and therefore sites of intense competition for political power and resources. As African urban areas are frequently represented by all of the major ethnic

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groups in a society, they are also arenas for defining national identity and testing the state's capacity to balance the demands of competing political communities. The high population densities of urban areas, moreover, facilitate political mobilization and challenges to national power. The resulting political unrest poses a direct threat to the stability of African states.

The security ramifications of urban poverty are of growing importance since, by 2025, the majority of the poor in Africa will live in urban as opposed to rural areas—reversing a longstanding pattern. In many countries, moreover, the poorest 20 percent in urban slums have worse human development indicators than the poorest 20 percent in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, amplifies susceptibility to poverty-induced instability, including the spread of disease and food shortages. It is estimated that 300 million urban Africans will be without

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sanitation by 2020. Roughly 225 million will not have access to potable water. These risks were illustrated in the 2007–2008 urban riots in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Senegal, and Mauritania, among other African countries, which broke out in response to rising prices of food, clothes, and gasoline. In the process, government buildings were destroyed and many people injured. With food prices once again rising rapidly, these tensions are likely to resurface.

Despite these mounting stresses, national and international actors have invested relatively little in urban development, livelihoods, governance, or programs to help stem the volume of urban migration. These changing demographics, however, will

fundamentally reshape the African security environment for decades to come.

## CURRENT URBANIZATION TRENDS

Africa is in a historic period of demographic change. In the early 1990s, two-thirds of all Africans lived in rural areas. By 2025, more than half of the African population will live in urban areas. And during the next quarter century, the urban population will grow almost twice as fast as the general population, increasing by more than half a billion from 1990 levels.

Worldwide, urban population levels of roughly 3.3 billion are projected to double by 2050. The African urban population, however, is expected to more than double its current level of 373 million by 2030 (see figure 1.1). That is, by 2030 there will be 760 million African urban dwellers, more than the total number of city dwellers in the entire Western hemisphere today. The East Africa region has the world's shortest projected urban population doubling time at less than 9 years: from 50.6 million today to an estimated 106.7 million by 2017 (see figure 1.2).

Africa's three giant urban agglomerations, Cairo, Kinshasa, and Lagos, continue to rise rapidly in their ranking among the world's largest metropolitan regions. In 2007, the urban metropolis of Cairo had 11.9 million inhabitants, Lagos 9.6 million, and Kinshasa 7.8 million. In 2015, Cairo will have 13.4 million, Lagos 12.4 million, and Kinshasa 11.3 million inhabitants—ranking 11<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup>, respectively, among the world's largest metropolitan regions. Projections show that Kinshasa, with 16.7 million inhabitants, will be Africa's largest urban agglomeration in 2025.<sup>3</sup>

While Africa has the world's highest rate of urbanization, it also has among the lowest rates of urban economic growth. Accordingly, urbanization in Africa has differed from other regions of the world in important respects. In other regions, urbanization followed jobs—created as a result of increased investment and economic activity generated from the agriculture sector. In Africa, there has been consistent underinvestment in agriculture leading to low productivity gains. This has limited the availability

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## RISING POPULATION GROWTH IN AFRICA'S CITIES

FIGURE 1.1: AFRICAN REGIONS' URBAN POPULATION TREND 1970-2050 (THOUSANDS)

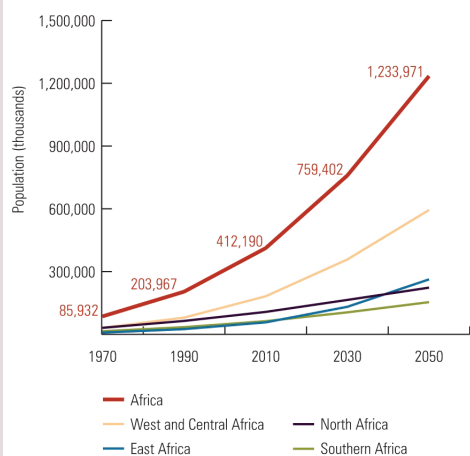
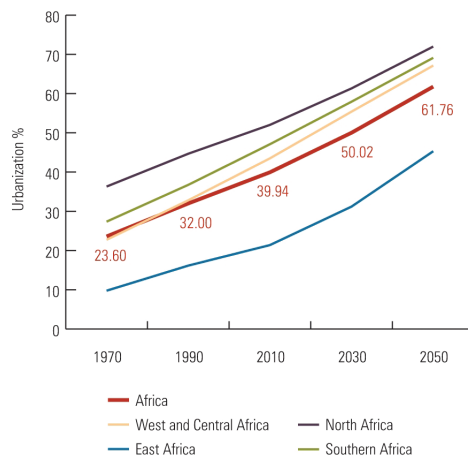


FIGURE 1.2: AFRICAN REGIONS' URBANIZATION TREND 1970-2050 (PERCENT)



Source: United Nations Human Settlements Programme

of assets that could be invested in off-farm economic activities in urban areas. The combination of growing economic globalization and expanded industrialized country agricultural subsidies, by constricting markets for Africa's agricultural exports, has worsened this predicament in the past decade. Consequently, unlike all other regions of the world, urbanization in Africa has not contributed, through economies of scale and value-adding production chains, to overall growth in gross domestic product.<sup>4</sup>

A notable aspect of urbanization in Africa, then, is that it has not, by and large, led to improvements in basic well being. This runs counter to the general theory that urbanization provides greater access to jobs, basic services, and social safety nets. Rather, the percentage of people with access to services in many African countries has not kept pace with the rise in urbanization. In other words, while African countries are "late urbanizers," they host some of the most deprived and volatile slums in the world. These tensions have been exacerbated by inadequate government capacity and unaccountable governance structures that restrict opportunities for citizens to articulate grievances.

### THE DYNAMICS OF URBAN FRAGILITY

The poor in urban areas face a distinctive set of risks that accentuate fragility compared to the

rural poor. Poor people in urban settings have a greater dependence on cash income and markets, including for food. They are therefore more vulnerable to fluctuations in food prices. In contrast, most rural households can produce some of the food they need at times of economic shocks and price increases. Accordingly, when there are steep price increases in food or other basic daily necessities, Africa's urban dwellers immediately feel the pinch. Urban unrest under these circumstances becomes much more likely.

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Urban areas are also more exposed to pollution, poor sanitation, and water shortages.<sup>5</sup> The approach to slums by many governments is to view them as illegal settlements. Governments are reluctant to bestow such settlements with legal rights given the financial costs involved in providing infrastructure and services. Politicians, meanwhile, gain limited political benefits for assisting slum

dwellers. Rather, many municipal administrations prefer to direct their funding toward “tangible” and politically visible infrastructure projects and investments outside of slum areas.

Urban poverty is also often understated statistically and thus not likely to be addressed in its full dimensions. National poverty lines are often defined as household consumption under \$1 or \$2 a day. Yet these thresholds do not take into account a wide range of costs and hazards that urban residents face. For example, while rural residents can typically collect fuels, building materials, some foods, water, and so forth from their environs, urban residents must pay for almost all of these.

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Vulnerability in urban areas is further exacerbated because of higher rates of violence and generally weaker community ties. Moreover, social safety nets, whether they come from neighbors and relatives or programs implemented by governments or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), tend to be less present in urban settings. For children and youth living in these cities, educational programs are frequently underfinanced, limiting opportunities to learn and gain the skills needed for long-term employment. In addition, personal insecurity in urban areas frequently inhibits families from sending children to school.

These challenges require difficult policy decisions, such as: What types of social services are likely to have the most immediate impact on urban fragility? How best to build local government capacity to effectively and accountably provide social services, after years of economic malaise, political breakdown, or general neglect? What potential synergies exist between rebuilding local government capacity and enhancing mechanisms of cooperation with civil society?

**CONNECTIONS BETWEEN URBAN FRAGILITY AND SECURITY RISKS**

Does rapid urban growth contribute to urban violence and fragility? Not by itself. Violence,

insecurity, and urban fragility are linked to weak local and national institutions, and limited or unequal access to economic opportunities. There are also diverse contextual drivers, such as narcotics trafficking in West Africa, political and economic cross-border migrants in Southern Africa, or climate change and resource scarcity leading to ethnic conflict in East Africa. Overall, this fragility is a manifestation of low levels of legitimacy, repressive government institutions, and insecurity at the local level that feed wider alienation and mistrust of the police and government agencies. Large wealth disparities are reinforced by political clientelism that directs government resources to ethnic and religious allies and further exacerbates these tensions. Indeed, this challenge affects much of Africa, from the national level to small villages. Yet as urban populations persistently expand amid limited economic opportunities, increased insecurity, and perceptions that the government is either disinterested or hostile, the potential for political fragility and violence escalates.

Research on the links between urban growth and violence in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries has indicated a weak relationship. In Africa, however, other factors are at play, such as greater economic instability, conflict over resources, weak governance, and weak states—and hence a lack of ability to address grievances. The lack of government capacity means that even when better policies are designed, they are difficult to implement at the scale necessary. Furthermore, the resources needed to provide adequate investment in improving urban living conditions are either not available or not a priority.

Urbanization and insecurity are thus connected by national and municipal governments’ inability to address grievances, combined with the resulting growing strains on housing, infrastructure, basic services, and livelihoods. Still, by themselves, these factors do not necessarily trigger violent conflict or political unrest. Qualifying variables include the willingness of elites to compromise, relative strength of civic organizations to promote political dialogue, and degree of political stability in neighboring countries.

## ADDRESSING URBAN FRAGILITY

The neglect of political and power relations in discussions of African urban development has hindered the development of effective policies to guide the current rapid population influx into Africa's urban areas. Moreover, it misses a potential opportunity to enhance development and political empowerment initiatives in densely populated areas. Governments and international actors need to look at urban policy needs from a wider lens.

**Recognize urban fragility as a development and security problem.** Basic services delivered effectively can improve perceptions of local government. Yet attention must be given to delivering services to meet immediate needs while strengthening public institutions over the longer term to ensure sustainability and equitable coverage. For national governments, this will require crafting creative and flexible policies that encourage the complementary strengths of local governments and civic organizations. These need not be either/or choices. With limited resources for urban development strategies, governments will need to determine by specific city and sector context the type, level, and delivery mechanisms that are most appropriate. While the

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local government may have serious institutional problems, experience in fragile states indicates that, except for the most egregiously corrupt governments, it is essential to find some pathways for building up government capacity. Priority focus areas include strengthening local initiatives in water and sanitation systems, encouraging civic participation in municipal budgets and monitoring government expenditures, and training local government officials in basic financial and project management. Programs to build capacity also provide national governments with mechanisms both to invest in local government and work with civic organizations.

While rising levels of violence, crime, fear, and insecurity in urban centers have focused attention on the need to address urban fragility, it should be remembered that these are symptoms of underlying problems. Accordingly, governments should incorporate policies aimed at reducing urban fragility into development planning. In this way, they are integrated within broader efforts to strengthen weak infrastructure and expand livelihoods for slum dwellers. This perspective also recognizes that it is critical to sustain initiatives to address urban fragility over time if they are to be effective. Approaching urban fragility solely as a security problem often leads to short-term instruments that are disconnected from underlying causes of insecurity and fragility. Poor people frequently report the value that they place on security, but this includes security of tenure and livelihoods as well as physical security. Investments in community policing are particularly important in providing the foundation for other forms of security. This presents a major challenge to governments, as developing effective policing is an undervalued skill among national governments and international actors alike.

**Improve local government capacity and accountability.** Good urban governance is probably the most important factor in enhancing stability. Broad and sustainable urban development depends on political leadership that is committed to a democratic and equitable vision of urban society. In most cases, this requires strengthening and empowering local governments, both elected authorities and local branches of national ministries.

This encompasses decentralization of power and resources to local authorities, and a thorough reframing of central government functions and policy frameworks in the areas of governance, policy reform, security, equal rights, and the economy. Examples of institutionalized channels for connecting decentralization and civic engagement are public hearings and consultations, community development committees, and participatory district planning councils. Such decentralization approaches enhance security by reducing “zero sum” or “winner-take-all” competition between different identity groups at the national level and allow for more

transparent distribution of resources. Decentralization by itself, however, does not necessarily reduce corruption or elite capture, which is why national governments and international actors must also invest in civil society capacities.

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The participation of civil society is considered a prerequisite of good governance, as it enhances government transparency and accountability. The same holds true for the adoption of legislation that enhances the protection of human rights, particularly with respect to the poor and vulnerable. Mechanisms to support positive civil society engagement include:

- ◆ legal standing for nongovernmental observers within institutions of public sector oversight
- ◆ systematic inclusion of these observers throughout the process of a given agency’s work
- ◆ well-defined forums to facilitate exchanges between citizens and public-sector actors
- ◆ structured access to official documentary information to enable informed oversight
- ◆ the right of observers to issue dissenting reports directly to legislative bodies and independent media.

Improvements in accountability and transparency of local authorities are needed to facilitate citizen engagement and improve service delivery. In the past, local officials may have been more accustomed to operating behind the scenes (in some cases pursuing narrow personal benefit at the expense of the general public). There are a range of tools that have been

developed to enhance citizen oversight and participation over the past decade, from Balanced Scorecards that report on the delivery of services to participatory budgeting, citizens charters, integrity pacts, and Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys, among others. Such initiatives have generated positive track records for urban systems across several continents.

**Livelihoods.** Governments and international actors need to invest in livelihood opportunities at an adequate scale to address the large number of unemployed. This includes expanding rural opportunities to slow the pace of migration and programs for out-of-school youth so as to diminish recruitment into gangs, criminal networks, or extremist groups. Mini-grants for innovative community-based organizations can provide the seeds for dozens of small initiatives. Programs can connect income-generating activities and permanent land leases with construction of adequate housing, safety and security, electricity, street lighting, and formal schooling. Local- and national-level NGOs can work on boosting skills and incomes through training, credit programs, and the formation of savings organizations. Children’s programs can enable adults to seek employment. And community groups can contribute to security by impeding criminal activities, such as trafficking, drugs, robberies, smuggling, and kidnapping. This, in turn, will reduce residents’ fear of leaving the household. Livelihood protection can also include policies to reduce the shocks of food price increases through short-term voucher or food coupon programs.

Governments and international actors, however, must avoid trying to select one or two “perfect” models. Instead, they should allow different approaches to flourish or flounder in practice and support promising citizen initiatives that only require additional support in order to scale up rather than always seek to start programs from scratch. Programs should build on what the urban poor have as existing assets, rather than focusing on what they do not have. The more assets urban households have, the less vulnerable they are. This recognizes that poor people are managers of complex asset portfolios, and their capacity to manage these assets shapes their ability to survive.



**Land tenure.** Another key lesson learned from urbanization in other regions is that poverty alleviation is most effective in projects that deliver secure, marketable instruments of land tenure to slum residents. In many African countries, the urban poor are still granted only temporary tenure, like occupancy permits, that are not fully bankable and do not promote the emergence of real property markets and

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corresponding property tax systems that can sustain local government operations. Thus, central governments should work to grant clear titles or other durable tenure instruments. Among the countries that have changed laws and regulations to improve tenure security with some apparent success are Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda.

## CONCLUSION

Urban fragility is likely to become an increasingly greater focus of African security interests in the coming years. Conventional security approaches, by themselves, will prove ineffective in addressing these challenges and will, in fact, just treat the symptoms. Rather, determined efforts are needed to build Africa’s local governance capacity and opportunities for urban unemployed youth, while increasing slum dwellers’ stake in society.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> David Satterthwaite, “The Underestimation of Urban Poverty in Low- and Middle-Income Countries,” International Institute for Environment and Development, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> UN-HABITAT.

<sup>4</sup> Diana Mitlin McGranahan et al., “Africa’s Urban Transition and the Role of Regional Collaboration,” Institute for International Economics and Development, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Lesli Bull-Kamanga, “From Everyday Hazards to Disasters: The Accumulation of Risk in Urban Areas,” *Environment and Urbanization* 15, no. 1 (April 2003).



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